

Four Poems · *Peter Johnson*

THE PROVIDER

Let's say he's at the company Christmas party and the boss orders everyone to play a game in which they unscrew their heads and place them into a large bamboo basket. Now what should he do when he's the last one to choose a head, and the one head left isn't his, and he can feel it isn't his, even though everyone else swears they have the right heads on, and his boss gets angry and says, "Of course that's your head, and if you want to keep your job, you better screw it on tightly?"

Or let's say that on a sunny Sunday morning he and his family leave home and drive to the country for a picnic. Now we're talking about his split-level home he's worked so hard for, with its manicured lawn and electric garage door, located in the best school district in the city.

Now what should he do if while he and the family are barbecuing, black-hooded figures break into his house, pulverize all its contents with sledgehammers, empty the pieces into large, green, plastic garbage bags, which they neatly stack along his front sidewalk, and then level his home by detonating sticks of dynamite planted in the baby's bedroom?

He, for one, considers these questions, which is why he never holds a steady job, and why he frequently moves his family, making sure they have no place to call home.

A RITUAL AS OLD AS TIME ITSELF

There's a man flying his wife. He's been at it for the last year of their marriage. With one end of string around her heart, the other around his fist, he scurries all day long up and down the shoreline.

A year ago, his wife yelped at the first tug, but now she seems content, as if she'll never come down.

And the man? Well, he's so happy he wishes he could fly her all the time. But just as he considers this, the sand beneath his feet gives way. He can no longer run, and his wife begins a slow descent.

"No," he yells, "It's not fair. It's only been one year, you flew me for two."

“Now, now,” she says, making a perfect landing. “You’ll get used to being in the air again, and, unlike you, I promise to be very gentle on that first tug.”

SOMEBODY’S FOOL

He walks barefoot on thumbtacks to keep his mind off his mind. Interviewed, reviewed, but not yet previewed, he’s imperfect for the job—too anal, enough imagination to be annoying. “Stick to poetry,” an inner voice murmurs, “something like *Tender Buttons*, only kinkier.”

At night, alone in his bed he smokes, reads self-help manuals, talks continuously to himself. “Is it my fault? Is anything my fault?” At which question a father-figure appears, clad in nothing but stained boxer shorts. “Of course it’s your fault,” he says. But how to take a father-figure seriously who wears stained boxer shorts and has bloody chunks of toilet paper spotting his face, a man with no hair on his chest, whose movements suggest something mechanical working inside his limbs.

And so he butts out his cigarette, and gives himself to darkness until the next morning comes upon him like a wet rhinoceros. He sits up in bed, reviews his qualifications. He massages the holes in his feet with Vaseline. He awaits a sign to get out of bed: a circa 1930 dirigible hovering outside his window, an urgent telegram from a snowed-in Tibetan monk, a cat floating into his bedroom on little fog feet. . . .

PRIVATE CITIZEN

He has this dream where he walks in on the President and First Lady while they’re making love. They both look at him as if to ask, Don’t we have enough problems with inflation and detente without you barging into our bedroom? He’s so embarrassed he apologizes, explaining he wouldn’t have interrupted them if he weren’t on urgent business. But he’s still uneasy, because as he’s talking to the President, he can’t take his eyes off the First Lady’s breasts. The President notices this, becomes suspicious, and asks for his credentials.

He’s tried to get help. He phoned his friend in California, who’s a psy-